

Frequently Asked Questions About Avian Flu

This document was developed through the cooperative effort of the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources, and the Massachusetts Department of Fish and Game

Disclaimer: The information in this document is accurate as of 5/25/2006. For the most up to date information on avian influenza, please visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website at www.cdc.gov or the World Health Organization website at www.who.int.

I. Risk of Avian Influenza for People

1. What is avian flu?

Avian influenza (also known as avian flu or bird flu) is a naturally occurring viral infection of birds. There are many types of avian influenza viruses. One particular type of avian flu, H5N1, has been spreading rapidly in birds in parts of Asia, Africa and Europe. A small number of human cases of H5N1 have been reported. Avian influenza viruses of any type rarely cause disease in humans.

2. What is the difference between avian flu and human flu?

Human flu is influenza in humans. Human flu passes from person to person through respiratory secretions and tends to occur in seasonal outbreaks. Avian flu is flu that spreads among birds. Humans who have certain types of exposure to infected birds can sometimes become infected with avian influenza viruses. When this happens, the flu would not generally spread to other humans, but the disease in the infected person may be very serious.

3. Can avian flu make me sick?

Avian flu viruses have only been known to infect people who have had a lot of direct contact with the respiratory secretions or droppings of infected birds. There have only been a small number of human cases of H5N1 infection, even though billions of people live in areas where H5N1 has been identified in birds. The spread of the H5N1 virus from person to person is very rare and has only happened when someone has had prolonged, unprotected exposure to the respiratory secretions of a person infected with the virus. Transmission has not been observed to continue beyond one person.

4. Has H5N1 avian flu been found in Massachusetts?

No. H5N1 avian flu has not been found anywhere in the United States.

5. How can I protect myself against the H5N1 avian flu?

Remember that the H5N1 virus has not been found in birds in Massachusetts or the United States and that H5N1 rarely spreads from person to person. If H5N1 avian flu is identified in the United States, the risk of human infection will likely be greater from contact with infected domestic poultry than from contact with wild birds. To protect yourself from avian influenza in general, avoid unnecessary contact with live poultry or wild birds. The best way to protect yourself from

all flu viruses is to practice good hand hygiene. If you work directly with live poultry or wild birds, more information is available at: [CDC presentations for the poultry industry](http://www.cdc.gov/flu/avian/professional/symposium_110304.archive.htm) [www.cdc.gov/flu/avian/professional/symposium_110304.archive.htm]. For more information about protecting yourself from flu, please go to the Massachusetts Department of Public Health's [hand washing](http://www.mass.gov/dph/cdc/handwashing.hw.htm) [www.mass.gov/dph/cdc/handwashing.hw.htm] and [influenza](http://www.mass.gov/dph/cdc/epii/flu/flu1.htm) [www.mass.gov/dph/cdc/epii/flu/flu1.htm] websites.

6. Can I be vaccinated against the H5N1 avian flu?

No. At this time there is no vaccine available for this particular type of influenza. For more information about the H5N1 vaccine development process, visit the [National Institutes of Health](http://www3.niaid.nih.gov/news/newsreleases/2005/H5N1QandA.htm) website [www3.niaid.nih.gov/news/newsreleases/2005/H5N1QandA.htm]. For information about the seasonal flu vaccine, please go to the Massachusetts Department of Public Health's [influenza](http://www.mass.gov/dph/cdc/epii/flu/flu1.htm) website [www.mass.gov/dph/cdc/epii/flu/flu1.htm].

7. I am feeling sick. Can I be tested for the H5N1 avian flu?

If you are sick, talk with your health care provider who will decide what type of testing is right for you. At this time, testing for H5N1 avian flu would not be done except in cases where a person had traveled to an area of the world heavily affected by H5N1 and had close exposure to H5N1-infected birds or people.

8. I am traveling to an area affected by H5N1, how can I protect myself?

The CDC does not recommend any travel restrictions to affected countries at this time. However, the CDC currently advises that travelers to countries with known outbreaks of H5N1 influenza avoid poultry farms, contact with animals in live food markets, and any surfaces that appear to be contaminated with feces from poultry or other animals. For more information, visit the [CDC traveler's health](http://www.cdc.gov/travel/other/avian_influenza_se_asia_2005.htm) website [www.cdc.gov/travel/other/avian_influenza_se_asia_2005.htm].

9. Is it safe to cook and eat chicken, other poultry and eggs?

Yes. It is safe to continue eating poultry and eggs. There have been no documented cases of avian influenza in humans caused by eating properly cooked poultry products. Additionally, no poultry or poultry products from countries affected by the H5N1 avian flu are legally allowed to enter the United States.

Poultry products should always be properly cooked and handled to prevent the spread of other illnesses such as Salmonella. More information about safe food handling can be found at the [USDA safe food handling](http://www.fsis.usda.gov/fact_sheets/safe_food_handling_fact_sheets/index.asp) website [www.fsis.usda.gov/fact_sheets/safe_food_handling_fact_sheets/index.asp].

10. Is it safe to go to fairs or other settings where there are large numbers of birds?

Yes. Precautions are in place to make sure that poultry being shown in public settings are free of diseases. Poultry must be tested for disease before they leave their home farm to be shown in another location.

Flock owners may visit fairs, farms, or other settings where there are large numbers of birds provided that appropriate biosecurity measures (precautions taken to reduce the chance of a disease being transported from one place to another) are used before and after such visits.

There are things people can do to make sure that viruses and other germs are not carried away from an infected location on clothes, shoes, vehicles or other items. Changing clothing and footwear is important; the same clothing should not be worn from one location where birds are housed to another. Vehicles and equipment should also be disinfected. More information about biosecurity can be found at the USDA [Biosecurity for the Birds](http://www.aphis.usda.gov/vs/birdbiosecurity/) website [http://www.aphis.usda.gov/vs/birdbiosecurity/].

11. Is it safe to hunt, field dress and eat wild game birds?

Yes. It is still safe to hunt, field dress and eat game birds. As a general precaution, hunters are always advised to wear gloves when skinning and preparing any game meat (this includes both birds and mammals) and to cook meat thoroughly before eating it.

12. Is it safe to use products made from bird feathers?

There are no known cases of avian flu being spread to humans by bird feathers in items such as down comforters, down coats, feather dusters, etc. In order to limit any possible risk of getting disease from feathers and other products derived from birds, the United States government has banned the importation of birds and bird products from H5N1 affected countries.

13. There are a lot of ducks and geese in our local pond. Is it safe to swim and/or fish in it?

Yes. Currently, there is no evidence of the H5N1 avian flu in the United States.

You should always wash your hands after fishing and wash your hands and take a shower after swimming or playing in the water. Also, since birds may carry a variety of bacteria, viruses, or parasites in their droppings, you should avoid exposure to bird droppings if possible.

If you are concerned about the conditions of a local pond or lake used for swimming, swim at a regulated beach where testing is conducted by the Department of Conservation and Recreation or public health agencies to make sure water is not polluted from human, animal, or farm waste. You may also contact your local health department for current water conditions.

14. Am I at risk of catching H5N1 avian flu from bird droppings in my garden?

No. H5N1 avian flu has not been identified in Massachusetts or the United States. However, since birds may carry various bacteria, viruses or parasites in their droppings, you should avoid exposure to bird droppings. Always wear gloves and wash your hands after gardening.

15. I found a dead bird in my pool. Is it safe to swim in it?

Yes. There is no evidence of avian flu spreading to people through chlorinated water. To protect yourself from many diseases, you should keep up with the chemical maintenance requirements of your pool, particularly when a dead animal has been in the water.

II. Avian Influenza in Birds

16. How do you know that there is no H5N1 avian flu in Massachusetts?

There is currently a surveillance program in effect. It consists of:

Surveillance for avian influenza in domestic birds in Massachusetts is directed by the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources (MDAR) in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture. MDAR has been screening domestic poultry from live bird markets as well as commercial and backyard flocks in Massachusetts for avian influenza since 1983. For more information, please go to the [Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources](http://www.mass.gov/agr) website [www.mass.gov/agr].

Surveillance for avian influenza in wild birds in Massachusetts is directed by the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture. For more information, please visit the [Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife](http://www.mass.gov/dfwele/dfw/dfw_toc.htm) website [www.mass.gov/dfwele/dfw/dfw_toc.htm].

Surveillance for avian influenza in humans is conducted by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health in close cooperation with health care providers in Massachusetts. For more information, go to the Massachusetts Department of Public Health's [influenza](http://www.mass.gov/dph/cdc/epii/flu/flu1.htm) website [www.mass.gov/dph/cdc/epii/flu/flu1.htm].

17. How do we know that migratory birds are not bringing H5N1 avian flu into Massachusetts? Who is keeping track of these birds?

At this time there is no evidence showing that the H5N1 avian flu is present in the United States in either wild or domestic birds. Surveillance of migratory birds in Massachusetts for H5N1 avian flu is being conducted by the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture. Most birds do not need to be tested. State and federal agriculture and wildlife agencies are testing waterfowl, such as ducks and geese, as the top priority for testing. Avian influenza usually involves migratory waterfowl and shorebirds, not backyard birds. For more information please visit the [USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service](http://www.aphis.usda.gov/newsroom/hot_issues/avian_influenza/avian_influenza.shtml) website [http://www.aphis.usda.gov/newsroom/hot_issues/avian_influenza/avian_influenza.shtml].

18. I have a dead bird in my yard. Could it have died from the H5N1 avian flu?

The H5N1 avian flu virus has not been found in Massachusetts or anywhere else in the United States so it is very unlikely that an individual dead bird in Massachusetts died from H5N1.

You may call the Massachusetts Department of Public Health Information Line at 1-866-MASS-WNV to report the dead bird. The Massachusetts Department of Public Health collects information about the location of dead birds during the mosquito season, and tests some of these birds for West Nile virus (WNV), to help identify areas where WNV may be present, as well as help determine where additional mosquito testing should be done.

19. How can I safely dispose of the dead bird in my backyard?

You should not touch any dead bird, or any other wild animal, with your bare hands. Double-bag the bird carcass by using gloves, a shovel or plastic bags on hands and place it in the trash. You should then wash your hands.

20. My local health department collects dead birds to test for West Nile virus (WNV). Why can't they test the dead bird I found in my yard for H5N1 avian flu?

WNV is found in the United States, including Massachusetts. WNV causes death in certain kinds of wild birds, particularly crows and blue jays. The Massachusetts Department of Public Health collects information about the location of dead birds during the mosquito season, and tests some of these birds for WNV, to help identify areas where WNV may be present, as well as help decide where additional mosquito testing should be done. The Massachusetts Department of Public Health's [arbovirus](http://www.mass.gov/dph/wnv/wnv1.htm) website [www.mass.gov/dph/wnv/wnv1.htm] provides more information about WNV and other arboviruses in Massachusetts.

Since the H5N1 avian flu has not been found in Massachusetts, or anywhere else in the United States, testing individual dead birds for the H5N1 avian flu is not being done at this time.

21. A large group of birds has suddenly died in my backyard or at my local recreation area. What do I do?

When three (3) or more sick, dying, or recently dead waterfowl (duck and geese), shorebirds (sandpipers, plovers), or other waterbirds (herons) are found at any single location they should be reported to the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife's Westboro Field Headquarters at 508-792-7270 or the USDA-APHIS-Wildlife Services MA/CT/RI Program at 413-253-2403.

Events involving other types of dead birds can be reported to the Massachusetts Department of Public Health Information Line at 1-866-MASS-WNV. The Massachusetts Department of Public Health collects information about the location of dead birds during the mosquito season, and tests some of these birds for WNV, to help identify geographic areas where WNV may be present as well as help decide where additional mosquito surveillance should be done.

22. There are several wild birds in my yard. Can I kill them?

No. It is illegal to hunt or kill wild birds outside of designated hunting seasons and areas. For more information about migratory bird hunting and other hunting regulations in Massachusetts, please visit the [Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife](http://www.mass.gov/dfwele/dfw/dfwpdf/dfw_migbird_regs.pdf) website [www.mass.gov/dfwele/dfw/dfwpdf/dfw_migbird_regs.pdf].

23. There are a lot of Canada geese around my child's school. Is my child at risk for the H5N1 avian flu?

No. At this time, there is no evidence of the H5N1 avian flu in the United States. Almost all human cases of the H5N1 avian flu have involved people who had a lot of direct contact with live poultry. You should instruct your child to avoid the birds since there are other germs (such as *Salmonella*) that can spread through their droppings. To date, no outbreak of human disease

has been linked to Canada geese. For more information on Canada geese in Massachusetts, visit the [Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife](http://www.mass.gov/dfwele/dfw/dfwgoose.htm) website [www.mass.gov/dfwele/dfw/dfwgoose.htm].

24. My child's class is hatching chicks in the classroom. Is my child at risk for H5N1 avian flu?

No. At this time, there is no evidence of the H5N1 avian influenza virus in the United States. In order to protect against other diseases that may be spread through contact with poultry, children should wear gloves and wash their hands after handling chicks. For more information about safely keeping animals in classrooms please go to the [Massachusetts Department of Public Health](http://www.mass.gov/dph/cdc/epii/rabies/schoolprotocol.htm) website [http://www.mass.gov/dph/cdc/epii/rabies/schoolprotocol.htm].

25. My neighbors and I like to feed and attract lots of birds. Am I at increased risk for the H5N1 avian flu?

No. H5N1 avian flu has not been identified in Massachusetts. Additionally, almost all human cases of the H5N1 avian flu have involved people who had a lot of daily contact with poultry. There is no evidence to suggest that bird feeding will put you at risk for the H5N1 avian flu. For information on bird feeding precautions, visit the [Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife](http://www.mass.gov/dfwele/dfw/dfw_toc.htm) website [www.mass.gov/dfwele/dfw/dfw_toc.htm].

26. Can the health department stop people from feeding birds?

There are no state public health laws that prohibit people from feeding birds. Contact your local government offices to find out if there are specific local ordinances regarding bird feeding in your city or town. Additionally, some neighborhood homeowners' associations have adopted rules that restrict bird feeding.

III. Avian Influenza and Pets

27. Is pet food that contains chicken or chicken products safe to give my pet?

Yes. The H5N1 virus is destroyed by cooking at temperatures above 158°F (70°C). The high temperatures required to make commercial pet food eliminate the risk of infection in pets that only eat these foods. Pets should never be fed uncooked poultry or eggs.

28. Can people catch avian flu from cats that have been exposed to sick birds?

No. At this time, the H5N1 avian flu is not known to be in Massachusetts. Also, at this time there is no evidence that cats can spread H5N1 to humans. No cases of avian influenza in humans have been linked to exposure to sick cats.

For more information about avian influenza in cats, please visit [Avian influenza — Frequently asked questions \(from the American Veterinary Medical Association\)](http://www.avma.org/public_health/influenza/avian_faq.asp) [www.avma.org/public_health/influenza/avian_faq.asp] or [H5N1 in Cats \(from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations\)](http://www.fao.org/ag/againfo/subjects/en/health/diseases-cards/avian_cats.html) [www.fao.org/ag/againfo/subjects/en/health/diseases-cards/avian_cats.html].

29. My pet dog/cat had a dead bird in its mouth. Could it get avian flu?

No. Since the H5N1 avian flu virus has not been identified in Massachusetts or the United States, dogs and cats that capture wild birds are not at risk for this disease. If your pet is ill, talk with your veterinarian about proper diagnosis and treatment.

30. Are my pet birds at risk for the H5N1 avian flu?

No. At present, the H5N1 avian flu is not known to be in the United States. In order to protect your pet birds from other avian diseases, keep your birds away from (isolated from) wild birds. If your pet is ill, talk with your veterinarian. It is recommended that ill birds or newly acquired birds be kept away from other birds for 30 days. Legally imported birds are quarantined (kept away from other birds even though they are not sick) upon entry into the United States, before they are made available for purchase.

IV. Avian Influenza and Poultry

31. I keep a flock of chickens in my yard. How can I protect myself?

Flock owners can protect themselves by avoiding face-to-bird contact, employing proper handwashing methods, wearing disposable or designated clothing and shoes in poultry areas and by assuring that items and equipment used in poultry areas are not used in other locations or living spaces unless properly disinfected. Using proven biosecurity measures can minimize risks. These measures include protecting the flock from exposure to potential sources of avian influenza (i.e., wild birds) and limiting access to poultry areas only to people and equipment necessary for the care and maintenance of the flock.

32. Can I vaccinate my poultry against the H5N1 avian flu?

No. At the present time there is no vaccine available for use in backyard/ breeder flocks.

33. How can I prevent my chickens from becoming infected?

Do not allow the flock to have contact with wild birds and waterfowl. Proper enclosures will help with this. Access to poultry and the premises where they are kept should be restricted to people and vehicles necessary to the maintenance of the flock. Prohibit contact with equipment and items that have been in contact with other poultry or potential sources of avian flu. Employ appropriate cleaning and disinfection methods to safeguard against disease. Wear disposable or designated clothing and shoes when in contact with poultry to avoid potential contamination.

34. Several of my chickens have suddenly died. Who should I call?

Flock owners should maintain a good working relationship with their veterinarian. Any time there is illness or sudden death within the flock, owners should contact their veterinarian. In the event that the veterinarian cannot be reached, contact the Department of Agricultural Resources, Division of Biosecurity and Regulatory Services at (617) 626-1795.

35. My neighbor raises chickens. Are his chickens safe? How do I know?

At present, H5N1 avian flu has not been identified in the United States. In areas where H5N1 infection is present in birds, it is only known to infect humans who have had a lot of direct contact with infected birds or their droppings. You can protect yourself by avoiding direct contact with your neighbor's birds.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

For the latest information on the worldwide H5N1 avian flu outbreak, visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at www.cdc.gov or the World Health Organization website at www.who.int.

For more information about avian flu in wild birds or game birds (quail, pheasants) in Massachusetts, please visit the Massachusetts Department of Fish and Game, Division of Fisheries and Wildlife's website at www.mass.gov/dfwele/dfw/dfw_toc.htm.

For more information about avian flu in domestic birds (chickens) or pets (cats, dogs, pet birds) in Massachusetts, contact the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources, Division of Biosecurity and Regulatory Services at (617) 626-1795 or visit their website at www.mass.gov/agr/animalhealth/poultry/avian_influenza.htm.

For more information about avian flu in people or pandemic flu planning in Massachusetts, contact the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Division of Epidemiology and Immunization at 617-983-6800 or online at www.mass.gov/dph.

If you have questions about your animal's health, please contact your veterinarian. If you have questions about your own health, please contact your doctor.